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Visions: The Dance Most of All: Envisioning an Embodied Eighteenth-Century Studies


Susannah Sanford

Texas Christian University, s.sanfordmcdaniel@tcu.edu

Sofia Prado Huggins

Texas Christian University, s.c.huggins@tcu.edu

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Visions: The Dance Most of All: Envisioning an Embodied Eighteenth-Century Studies

Abstract

The editors introduce this special issue of ABO, highlighting the work of the authors included in the issue. The introduction draws on recent scholarship re-visioning the work of the long, “undisciplined” eighteenth century, arguing for an eighteenth-century studies that embodies our intersectional identities and honors the experiences of bodyminds surrounding texts and authors, as well as the bodyminds that interact with those texts in the present. Throughout the years, scholars have demonstrated that there is no single vision of what eighteenth-century scholarship is or should be, but rather multiple visions. This introduction urges scholars to consider how an eighteenth-century studies that focuses on embodied experience can and should respond to present-day issues of racial inequity, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, and other forms of systemic oppression which remain deeply rooted in the structures of power of the long eighteenth century. Revising our ideas of what is possible, what is visible, what is required of us as teacher-scholars remains our foremost task.

Keywords

vision, bodymind, undisciplined, introduction, race, gender, sexuality

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Cover Page Footnote

We are indebted to our co-editor, Dr. Mona Narain, for her input, feedback, and generous support. We send our thanks to our reviewers for their helpful feedback and comments, as well as the participants in BWWC 2020 for their inspiring papers and discussions. Special thanks to our partners and children and support system, without whom we would not have been able to work on our scholarship.

*Both the melody and the symphony. The imperfect dancing in the beautiful dance.
The dance most of all. - from "Ovid in Tears" by Jack Gilbert*

Here is a vision we hold in our minds' eyes: a conference room, chairs pushed to the walls, a pattern of bodies moving across the floor, clapping hands, laughter, music cheerfully piped through the sound system. The date was March 7, 2020, and within the next three days, most of the United States went into lockdown, lagging behind many other nations around the world. For the next twelve months and more, we waited and watched and mourned and coped as best we could while the world changed before our eyes. The two weeks of lockdown stretched indefinitely until we eventually realized that there is no going back to normal. There is no going back.

Before the point of no return, we gleefully danced, unaware of the emotional weight this last academic interaction would carry. Saturday afternoon, the final day of the British Women Writers Conference 2020 (BWWC 2020), was the last time many of us had physical contact with people outside our households for an entire year. We danced the afternoon away under the expert direction of Cheryl Wilson, learning [Regency-era choreography](#) and ballroom expectations in joyful, chaotic praxis. Even then we asked: should we be doing this? The hand sanitizer was passed around and we all looked at each other, already wondering what would await us when we returned to our separate homes around the world.

Conference attendees parted ways and continued working on the ideas we shared during that early spring weekend, ideas centered around the theme of the conference: visions. This cluster in ABO draws specifically from BWWC 2020 and the time we spent together sharing research, learning, dancing. The essays extend beyond the years listed in the full title of *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*, due to the scope of the conference on women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As per the journal's [philosophy](#), the women writers whom we study crossed boundaries, including those marked by the standard periodization of ABO, and thus honoring the long impact of their work remains true to the spirit of the journal. The emerging authors included in this special issue have expanded and pushed their thinking, harkening back to our theme of "visions" and all its meaning. The theme was particularly appropriate for 2020 as we all collectively adapted our "vision" of the

future and what it would hold. It was especially important given recent critical work in studies of the long eighteenth-century. But like the image of gleeful dancing, before the world shut down, the events of 2020 and 2021 have profoundly reshaped how we see the deeply meaningful embodied interactions we experienced at the conference and what the theme “visions” can mean for how we work and study in academia now and in the future.

The word “visions” most obviously refers to physical sight. What can we observe or see in our study of the eighteenth century and its many facets? However, visions can be seen in the mind’s eye, they can be cast, they can be worked toward. We can *envision*. As scholars, we constantly engage in *revision*. We might extend this metaphor to cover re-vision, or re-visioning. We can view, literally or metaphorically, the field through new lenses, from new vantages, and we observe this in practice in the work of several scholars. As we gather our materials, studies, and bits of the archive, scholars studying the long eighteenth century engage in envisioning, re-visioning, and, yes, perhaps even a little revision.

The theme of [“visions”](#) encouraged conference participants to engage with British women’s writing through these different applications and nuanced definitions, to attend to the ways vision and perception contributed to meaning within familiar texts, to continue to turn our attention to texts and writers that have been previously overlooked, and to reimagine, not just the subjects of eighteenth-century studies but the very purpose of our study. Eugenia [Zuroski’s](#) keynote at the conference on humor in Eliza Haywood’s *Eovaii* invited the audience to consider laughter as a way of knowing and as a means of resistance, and as the frequent laughter that filled the lecture hall evidenced, conference members experienced how some ways of knowing engage the body every bit as much as the mind.

During the dance workshop, we attempted to connect our historical and scholarly minds with our often-unwieldy bodies. While [Cheryl Wilson](#) taught us some simple country dances to close the conference, we laughed and stepped on each other's toes. We experienced firsthand the “representation and reconstruction” of interdisciplinary and embodied texts through dance (Wilson). We stumbled

clumsily through the steps, wondering if perhaps we were not the protagonists we originally presumed ourselves to be.

The last dance Cheryl attempted to teach the group was new. Cheryl had never taught this dance before, but to us, it seemed suspiciously straightforward. The dance was done in a rectangular group of six that moved downward and upward through the columns. We were, by now, experienced at this, we thought rather smugly.

It did not go to plan. Cheryl stopped us all after several failed attempts at our sloppy rectangular exchange and modified the dance for us. A room full of intelligent scholars, already well-versed in following directions and following one another around the room, could not sort out how to change rectangular formations every 32 counts.

We are convinced our comedic failure to coerce our bodies into praxis during the dance is because scholars are too often focused on their minds interacting with a screen, a sedate body, a static text. Instead of being “unable to see the forest for the trees,” we delight in studying the forest, analyzing its moods. For example, we see ballroom scenes in eighteenth-century fiction as legible tropes, describing political relationships, the marriage market, gender dynamics. Standing in one room together, thirty-five scholars could not figure out a common Regency dance formation because we saw [Jane Austen’s Emma Woodhouse](#), and [Frances Burney’s Lord Orville](#), and Olivia Fairchild of [The Woman of Colour](#) instead of our dance partners. We looked at the dance from a distance, with the forest-eyes of the twenty-first-century academics. Similarly, as scholars, we do not see our beloved characters as bodyminds or even representations of possible lived experiences. We examine them analytically, observationally, new-historically.¹

In retrospect, our dance together became an emotional touchstone, a moment of embodied joy and connection that now seems almost impossible and also impossibly precious. The hardship of the last two years has added a heaviness to the happiness of BWWC 2020. The loss of life and intense isolation we have experienced push us to consider ethnographically how our lived experiences exist in conversation with our work. These watershed cultural moments demand that academic discourse shift to address it directly. Over the last year, any illusions

that our scholarship could be contained within the neat bounds of disciplinary periodization have dissipated. The silos and “fields” on which we rely are built on knowledge systems that, as Megan Peiser states, are “inherently colonialist,” especially the idea “that things have to be written down in certain ways, by certain people, saved in certain places in order to ‘count’” (187). Our work cannot remain nestled in a jewel box labeled “eighteenth-century studies” or “nineteenth-century literature,” protected from the violence of racism, colonialism, heteronormativity, ableism, and other systemic forms of oppression that these very disciplinary fields have perpetuated and, in some cases, even founded.

Of course, there is no single vision of what eighteenth-century scholarship is or should be, but rather multiple visions. As Kathleen Lubey noted during the thirty-year anniversary of Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown’s 1987 collection *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, the volume exhibited a “diversity of approach that still feels current” more than thirty years later (335). In that same issue of *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Lawrence Lipking reminds us that “[n]ew eighteenth centuries had always been plentiful, beginning in the eighteenth century itself” (327). While scholarly approaches that emphasize sociability and networks continue to offer new insights into the multiplicity of “eighteenth centuries,” the old vision of what “counts” as worthy of attention in eighteenth-century studies, dominated by white, male figures of solitary genius retains considerable power in the field. Surely there remains much to be said about canonical figures such as Swift and Pope, Kant and Hume, but we resist a vision of eighteenth-century studies which fails to see beyond outdated definitions of literature and literary genius, of history and historical significance. Scholars tackle older regimes of thought differently. Laura Brown, in her interview in celebration of “ASECS at 50,” a series in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, suggests we look for ways of “stretching the eighteenth century” against boundaries, examining connections around ideas and movements (Brown and Cohen 561). Susan S. Lanser encourages us to re-vision the connections between form and formation, between study and enthusiasm, between time and teaching (Lanser and Eron). Others argue for diving deeper, rather than stretching wider, and reading *along the archival grain*.² The long eighteenth century sustains all these visions and re-visions, letting us continue excavating, learning, researching. As an academic discipline, we do not need to expand only our vision. We do not need to see only the trees or the forest. An entirely new landscape already exists. Many of

us have been working toward it for decades. The last two years have only made clearer the cost of ignoring the difficult work of envisioning a more transparent eighteenth-century studies. It's time to embrace that we are "imperfect dancers" and re-vision together.

As academics, we are still often encouraged to think of our work as labor of the mind. Although feminist scholars, affect theorists, and especially those working in Disability Studies have pushed against the view of scholarly labor as purely mental, the mind-body divide remains an unspoken tenet of our training in academia.³ We are the perhaps unwitting heirs to Descartes's [mind-body dualism](#), often forgetting that our bodies are necessary for our work--teaching, research, writing. Despite the evolution of how the West conceives of the relationships between bodies and minds, even those who did not think of them as distinct entities argued, like Locke, that the capacity for thought was the defining characteristic of the human (Jolley). This cleaving of the mind-body is an intergenerational wound that leads us so often to neglect our bodies. Worse, bodies become known only as sites of violence. The enslaved body is read in the scars on the back, as when Mary Prince was forced to bare herself to Mrs. Pringle.⁴ The immigrant body is supposed to be invisible, a body which many refuse to see unless it is a corpse. The Black body is a visible target for state violence. The Indigenous body persists even after centuries of genocide. The trans body, the female body, the queer body, the brown body, the Asian body...to live in these bodies is to know in your bones that visibility is so often a harbinger of violence.

In 2020 we were forced to see bodies, our own, as well as bodies on a global scale, irrespective of any previous privilege which afforded us emotional distance. As the death toll mounted, we counted our bodies as data in COVID-19 trackers on institutional websites. We checked the numbers for the city, county, state, country. We graphed bodies to compare them to previous pandemics. We saw bodies fill the morgues until they overflowed. Masks and sanitizers were a constant reminder of the fragility of the body. We also came to understand that living in this world requires a body, no matter how fragile. All our pressing questions are those of bodies: human and non-human, planetary and governmental, energetic and material. We cannot afford to spend time on the

fantasy of the disembodied mind when our bodies, all of them, are under constant threat.

We need a vocabulary that addresses our trauma and the failed dualism of mind and body. Margaret Price brought the term “bodymind” to feminist disability studies, to us, from the work of trauma studies.⁵ Price urges us to consider pain alongside desire, to let the empty rhetoric of illness convey all of its meaning. This special issue is imbued with the hope of being witnessed, “even in the midst of unbearable pain” (Price 280). We have spent the last two years in the midst of an unbearable pain that is always-already present. The bodyminds we have lost; the expected futures we now mourn; the lived realities from which we produce scholarship, from which we teach, from which we tweet and blog and reach out to our communities. We create and compose *about* bodyminds, but also from bodyminds and *for* bodyminds. Scholarship that does not acknowledge our bodyminds and positionality is not and can no longer be truthful. The immense privilege of letting one’s body be an invisible watermark behind the text erases the labor and trauma of our collective lived experience.

Now, nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, we understand “visions” differently than we did in March 2020. Our urgency to pay attention to bodyminds is born of the loss and isolation of the past two years. “Visions” now represents a call to pay attention to, to *witness* bodyminds in our study of eighteenth and nineteenth-century women’s writing: the bodyminds in the texts as well as the ones who created or engaged with them. And, perhaps most importantly, “Visions” represents the ethical responsibility that our scholarship now acknowledge the bodyminds of the present; what we do as scholars does not stay contained neatly on pages or folders on our computers or tucked away safely in our brains. It affects real, living bodyminds to whom we hold a degree of responsibility.

Eighteenth-century scholars have been theorizing new ways of knowing bodyminds. Saidiya Hartman and Marisa Fuentes discuss and practice critical fabulation as a way of knowing the lives of those left as fragments of archives. Hartman describes critical fabulation, a methodology she coined, as “laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible” in a “double gesture” that “can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a

cultural history” while “enacting the impossibility of representing the lives” of the subaltern “through the process of narration” (Hartman 11). A narrative vision of the long eighteenth century includes those blurred in small fragments of texts, lost in translation, buried in history. In her recent talk, Fuentes read a newspaper advertisement for a runaway slave and delved deeply into what the woman would have seen and experienced based on historical knowledge, performing the praxis of critical fabulation for listeners to experience Fuentes’s cast vision. [Jazzmen Lee-Johnson](#) takes critical fabulation to the world of production and art, creating connections between lived experiences in the twenty-first century and moments we glimpse from centuries ago.⁶ These scholars and others practicing similar methodologies use historical knowledge to honor bodyminds and lived experience, envisioning and re-visioning our relationship with archival fragments.

To re-vision also requires that we interrogate where our academic disciplines have profited by ignoring violence against bodyminds, most specifically the racist structures which in many cases have made these very disciplines possible. In July 2020, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireless Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, published “Undisciplining Victorian Studies” in the *LA Review of Books*. A longer version of this essay was published in the Spring 2020 issue of *Victorian Studies*. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong pressed Victorianists to “interrogate and challenge our field’s marked resistance to centering racial logic.” The concept of undisciplining, drawn from Christina Sharpe’s 2016 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, calls scholars to push against the boundaries of discipline, periodization, and method, which often serve to elide the centrality of racism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity in the very works we study, even cherish. Even as we engage with these systems of oppression intellectually, we cannot forget that these ideologies are enacted on bodyminds. “Undisciplining Victorian Studies” connects with efforts from eighteenth-century studies such as [The Bigger 6 Collective](#) and #BIPOC18, noting that undisciplining is a transdisciplinary process, a practice of re-vision that demands unflinching attention to the closeted aspects of our fields of study from which we have so often looked away. The essays in this special issue stretch from the eighteenth-century to the long nineteenth century, in practice demonstrating that undisciplining must carry across the boundaries of periodization that often define our fields of study. As the events of Summer 2020 made abundantly clear, “engaging histories of slavery and empire aren’t simply optional presentist critical moves, but rather required

methods for understanding the endurance of conflict and strife precisely as real and ongoing violence” (“[Undisciplining Victorian Studies](#)”). This cross-period call for undisciplining demands that we revise not only what we envision as worthy of study but the very purpose of our scholarship in the present moment. The essays in this issue discuss well-known genres, texts, and figures with attention to histories of gender oppression, racism, and colonialism, and thus we hope that this special issue on “visions” engages with the spirit of “undisciplining,” acknowledging how the “real and ongoing violence” poses a material threat to fellow bodyminds.

2020 also made the structural inequalities of academia ever more obvious, particularly in how it affected women and primary caregivers. In the spring 2021 issue of ABO, scholars published reflections on how the pandemic had affected their careers, work-life balance, and sense of academic connection. With the increasing demands of caregiving falling mostly on the shoulders of women, the pandemic caused a significant drop in publications for women, particularly women of color. Groups like [WriteWithAphra created communities of support](#) in order to combat the unfair distribution of labor in our field. On top of the already dwindling institutional support for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies, early career scholars were [hit particularly hard](#) as the bottom fell out of an already difficult job market. Scholars of color faced pressure to perform relationships with widespread social justice movements and protests. Disabled scholars watched others receive the accommodations previously denied them because of “inconvenience” or “impracticability,” though they were practicable now. The inequitable experience of hardship, always-already present even without a pandemic, has become a widespread, inescapable fact of how scholars write and produce knowledge.

Besides writing groups and support communities, scholarship and knowledge adapted to our new ways of inhabiting our changed world. Conferences moved online, granting increased participation and access while stretching the limits of what our eyes and ears could tolerate as we watched screens and listened to computer speakers. Patricia Matthew organized a series of [dialogues](#) tackling race, romanticism, and Blackness. The University of Maryland’s Center for Literary and Comparative Studies virtually hosted [discussions](#) surrounding antiracism in our teaching, research, and public engagement. We tweeted

information for lectures, made tea before sitting in front of our computers yet again, and supported important conversations about moving ourselves and our fields forward. We heard speakers and asked questions and attended events that would otherwise have been outside our travel budgets, time constraints, and physical limitations.

The essays in this special issue continue the work we began in March 2020 and respond to the impulse to envision the long, “undisciplined” eighteenth-century studies from various embodied standpoints. Teaching itself is a deeply embodied practice; even asynchronous online courses demand embodiment from both instructors and students. Megan Cole’s essay, [“Re-historicizing Genre: Teaching Haywood’s *The Adventures of Eovaai* in a Fantasy-Themed Survey Course,”](#) reflects on a variety of embodiments in her experience teaching Haywood’s novel in a genre survey course, rather than the more familiar context of an eighteenth-century literature course. Cole situates *Eovaai* in relation not just to a broad array of other fantasy texts but to the particular situation of teaching a survey course at a public, state research university where most of her students in the course were non-English majors at the beginning of their university education. Good pedagogy requires attention to the material circumstances of teaching, as Cole so ably demonstrates. In addition to fulfilling the broad university requirements, however, Cole explains that including *Eovaai* in a genre survey class offers “a more nuanced introduction to the period than typified narratives focused on male authors and the realist novel by illustrating the centrality of women novelists, not only to the eighteenth century but to the development of popular genres.” With care for the materiality of *Eovaai* as well as its historical and generic features, Cole’s essay demonstrates that approaching an eighteenth-century text through genre can emphasize rather than occlude the real-world effects of a literary text such as *The Adventures of Eovaai* and illuminate how female writers shaped bodies of literature.

In [“‘Which made it look a gentleman’s’: Anne Lister’s Use of Lord Byron in her Construction of a Gentlemanly Image,”](#) Michelina Olivieri discusses how Anne Lister drew on publicly queer figures, specifically Lord Byron’s public persona, to carefully create a public image of masculine gentility. Lister negotiated her own visibility—and by extension, precarity. Olivieri argues that Lister practiced “queer survival” through her curated public image, employing a visual shorthand

to build a community for herself while navigating mainstream British society behind a protective mask of fashionable Byronic masculinity. Lister wielded a “cultural phenomenon” of reliance on gender expression and sexuality to code one’s class status. Her “rather softly gentleman-like” persona used a “mask of respectability and social status” to “express her queerness” somewhat more safely. Olivieri draws on Lister’s practice of masking, both in writing and in identity, to investigate the relationship between embodiment and visibility. Utilizing culturally accepted visual cues of gender and power, Lister’s process of mirroring embodiment to construct identity traces some of the implications that extend to the safety and connection possible for human bodyminds.

The reach of the long, undisciplined eighteenth century is evident in Preeshita Biswas’s essay, [“If You See Her Face You Die”: Eighteenth-Century Gothic, Imperial Gaze, and Colonialism in Bithia Croker’s *Indian Ghost Stories*.”](#) Biswas traces how Croker adapted eighteenth-century Gothic tropes for new colonial contexts in the late nineteenth century, specifically in the figures of the nautch girl and the dak bungalow. Embodiment is a major thread of this essay, as Biswas examines Croker’s use of gothic tropes at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. This analysis of generic conventions’ implications towards embodied experience is similar to Megan Cole’s reading of *Eovaai* as fantasy and how such a reading illuminates the material effects women such as Eliza Haywood had on the development of popular literary genres. In “If You See Her Face You Die,” the gothic provides tools for Croker to critique British imperialism and disrupt colonial hierarchies, displacing Western power from colonized space. Particularly in her analysis of the ghostly nautch girl, Biswas demonstrates that British imperial power depended in large part on strict social regulation of women’s sexuality, relying on the moral “purity” of white women and simultaneously depicting native colonized women as the embodiment of “deviant sexuality.”

The articles in this issue build on the ongoing revisioning of the long, sometimes very long, eighteenth century. As scholars, we embody our intersectional identities and honor the experiences of bodyminds surrounding texts and authors. Authors Megan Cole, Michelina Olivieri, and Preeshita Biswas continue revisioning how we teach, study, and experience women writers. After more than a year since the British Women Writers conference from which these essays are drawn, we may have forgotten the steps to the dances from the final workshop,

but the most important of its lessons remains clear: despite our missteps, what mattered most of all is that we danced. An embodied eighteenth-century studies invites all of us imperfect dancers to revise our ideas of what is possible, what is visible, what is required of us as teacher-scholars. The articles here work toward honoring and revising our collective vision.

¹ Here, we refer to Stephen Greenblatt's vision of New Historicism, which he develops in "Invisible Bullets." *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988), 21-65.

² Both Ann Laura Stoler and Marisa Fuentes use this phrase, "along the archival grain," to describe attending to what is not written in the archival fragments, what we cannot see, what remains unsaid or buried.

³ For more on the importance of the integrated bodymind in scholarship, we suggest the work of Travis Lau, Emma Sheppard, Sami Schalk, Sarah Ahmed, Patricia Matthew, and Jason Farr.

⁴ In an 1831 letter from Mrs. Pringle to a reader, the scars of enslavement on the body of Mary Prince, an enslaved woman, are described as corroboration of Prince's autobiographical tale. Four women (Mrs. Pringle, Susannah Strickland, Susan Brown, and Martha A. Brown) examined Prince's body as evidence after receiving requests from readers for confirmation of the story's truth. The letter is appended to the text in the Penguin Classics edition of *The History of Mary Prince*, edited by Sara Salih.

⁵ The term "bodymind" suggests "mental and physical processes not only affect each other but give rise to each other."

⁶ Marisa Fuentes and Jazzmen Lee-Johnson spoke with Jessica Marie Jones in a panel for the British Women Writers Conference of 2021. <https://2021bwwc.wordpress.com/>

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